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ABSTRACT

People are generally reluctant to transmit bad news to others. To examine this reluctance, college students (N=96) were randomly assigned to two conditions (i.e., assistant or confederate subject). Assistants administered a "psychological inventory" to confederate subjects. Student assistants believed the subject had previously taken one inventory and had either done well or poorly. Further, students believed the previous test results were either valid (low ambiguity) or of questionable validity (high ambiguity). The confederate then requested feedback from the assistant and their responses were recorded. Analyses of results showed that the students transmitted positive information more readily than negative information, and that they spoke more in high-ambiguous rather than low-ambiguous conditions. Research varying task importance is needed. (WAS)

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The Valence Bias and Ambiguity in Interpersonal Communication

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Abstract

Tesser and Rosen (1975) found that people are reluctant to transmit bad news. The present study employed a communication paradigm in which a confederate sought information from the subject. The information varied in valence (positive/negative) and ambiguity (high/low). Positive information was transmitted more readily than negative information. Subjects spoke more in high-ambiguous than low-ambiguous news conditions.

The Valence Bias and Ambiguity in Interpersonal Communication

Bearers of bad news are presented with an unpleasant dilemma: should information be withheld to temporarily spare the target person the negative affect associated with bad news, or should information be delivered to permit the target person to deal with the problem before it worsens?

Previous research on the tendency of communicators to withhold unpleasant messages focused on communicator variables such as self-concern, concern for the recipient, and concern with norms (Tesser and Rosen, 1975). The present study examines the reluctance to transmit bad news and a self-presentational (Schlenker, 1980) perspective is adopted. In low-ambiguous news conditions good news subjects should be more truthful and talkative than bad news subjects, whereas in high-ambiguous news conditions good news subjects should be less truthful and talkative than bad news subjects.

Method

Ninety-six University of Dayton students were randomly assigned to conditions. Subjects were led to believe that they were "assistants" and they were asked to administer Part 2 of a "psychological inventory" to a "subject". Subjects believed Part 1 had been previously administered and the results indicated the "subject" had performed well/poorly. Subjects were told the results were either valid (low ambiguity) or of questionable validity (high ambiguity). The confederate requested feedback from the subject and the subject's response was recorded.

Results

Self-awareness was manipulated through the presence or absence of a mirror. No main effects for self-awareness and no interactions involving self-awareness were found. All analyses reported here were on data collapsed across self-awareness conditions.

A 2 X 2 (Valence X Ambiguity) between-groups analysis of variance on truthfulness showed a valence main effect, F (1, 92) = 4.162, $p < .05$ (See Table 1). A 2 X 2 X 3 (Valence X Ambiguity X Type) between-groups analysis of variance on message length (number of words spoken) yielded main effects for ambiguity, F (1, 84) = 4.803, $p < .04$, type, F (2, 84) = 30.110, $p < .00001$, and an interaction between ambiguity and type, F (2, 84) = 3.333, $p < .04$ (See Table 2 and Figure 1). High-ambiguous news subjects spoke more than low-ambiguous news subjects when truthful or evasive communications were delivered, whereas deceptive messages were always terse.

Discussion

The valence effect was obtained, but the predicted interaction did not occur. A floor effect may have occurred because subjects believed the test was extremely important and subjects behaved confidentially in all conditions. Research varying task importance is needed. More work on actual informativeness (e.g., truthfulness) and apparent informativeness (e.g., talkativeness) is needed.

References

Schlenker, B. R. Impression management: The self-concept, social identity, and interpersonal relations. Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1980.

Tesser, A., and Rosen, S. The reluctance to transmit bad news. In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), Advances in experimental social psychology (Vol. 8). New York: Academic Press, 1975.

TABLE 1

Cell Means and Standard Deviations of Message Truthfulness as a Function of Message Valence and Ambiguity

	Message Valence	
Ambiguity	Positive	Negative
High	2.792	3.167
	(.977)	(.917)
Low	2.750	3.167
	(1.032)	(.868)

Note. Four levels of truthfulness were coded by a blind judge: (1) full truthfulness, (2) partial truthfulness, (3) evasion (e.g., excuses and red herring messages), and (4) deception. Numbers in parentheses indicate the standard deviation (n = 24 per cell).

TABLE 2

Cell Means and Standard Deviations of Message Length as a Function of Message Valence, Ambiguity, and Message Type

Message Type	Message Valence			
	Positive		Negative	
	High Ambiguity	Low Ambiguity	High Ambiguity	Low Ambiguity
Truthful	M=16.63 s=(4.96) n= 8	8.00 (5.29) 6	19.25 (9.00) 4	11.67 (15.14) 3
Evasive	15.70 (7.01) 10	12.69 (5.97) 13	25.90 (19.88) 10	17.42 (8.03) 12
Deceptive	3.67 (3.72) 6	8.80 (10.50) 5	5.90 (6.92) 10	4.33 (3.84) 9

FIGURE 1

Message Length as a Function of Ambiguity and Message Type